

Why phenomenology in communication research?

LENORE LANGSDORF

*Speech Communication Department, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale,
Carbondale, IL 62901–6605, U.S.A.*

Phenomenology is, at the very least, a choice to study an environment from a situated location in actual experience and oriented toward particular aspects of the spectrum of human activity. Communication is, at the very least, a process of informing someone about something, and so forming and perhaps transforming both the environment and those who communicate within it in particular ways. The essays in this issue of *Human Studies* show various sorts of phenomenological analysis at work in studying diverse aspects of human communicative activity. Thus, the essays themselves provide illustrations of how phenomenology can be useful, and actually is used, in communication research. Rather than summarize those investigations here, I would like to preface them with a consideration of why phenomenological analysis is suited to the subject matter of interest to these authors.

Although readers of *Human Studies* typically are knowledgeable about phenomenological research, that comprehension may well not extend to reasons for using phenomenology to investigate communicative phenomena as distinct from, although also correlated with, phenomena of interest in longer-established disciplines within the human/social sciences. In what follows, therefore, I want to tell something of the character of this research area, and will focus on two topics in doing so. The first is the predominant mode of theorizing in the discipline; the second is the predominance of practice over theory. After this brief depiction of these dimensions of the field, I will set out some reasons in support of my claim that phenomenology is a preferable alternative orientation for communication research.

Communication research as an academic discipline began in the early years of this century with assumptions which many in the human/social sciences now characterize as empiricistic, scientific, or even, positivistic. Certain conceptions of human beings and our environments – and thus, of the subjects and objects of communication – were borrowed from academically acceptable and generally admired practices in the physical sciences,

and from those schools of psychology that adhered to a physical science model for going about research. For example, inquiry typically presumed a radical separation between “subject” and “object” – including and especially, investigators and their topics of investigation. Also, both subjects and objects were presumed to be given to the research situation; that is, the researcher as well as the communicating subjects of research, and the objects they communicated about, were assumed to exist prior to communicative activity as independent, already formed entities. Although the people involved might “change their minds” as a result of the informing and persuading that occurs in communication, neither they nor the topics of interest in their discourse were understood as coming to be (coming into existence) in the course of communicative activity.

The standard for investigation that grew from modeling communication research on a physical science model, then, understands inquiry as a type of connection that sets “subjects” into a special relation with “objects.” Language is conceptualized within this model as serving those subjects as another and more basic connector; as a tool or means for referring to objects and transmitting information. The environment, then, is considered to be more or less “objective,” and communication’s function is to report on the acts, events, circumstances, and things of that environment accurately; which is to say, without “subjective” interference. In epistemic encounters with the environment – that is, in the context of investigations that seek knowledge – this model understands the function of language to be one of reporting truthfully; of providing statements (of how things are) that are verifiable, which is to say, that correspond to how “in fact” things are; or at least, that withstand efforts at falsification. These assumptions have resisted reflective criticism, perhaps because they fit well with everyday beliefs about people, things, and language – which is to say, perhaps because they continue in comfortable allegiance to a model of inquiry formed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and still embedded in everyday beliefs about knowledge.

Contemporary (post-modern) philosophy and rhetoric in general, the subdisciplines called philosophy of science and rhetoric of inquiry in particular, and practitioners in the sciences who reflectively attend to their own beliefs and practices, have developed extensive criticisms and even refutations of these assumptions during the past several decades. Yet communication research has been slow to recognize the positive significance of that critical scholarship for its own practices and even, for its institutional survival. This is in a sense odd, for the thrust of most late-modern and much post-modern philosophical inquiry lends enormous conceptual support to communication researchers’ claims for the value of their work. It also offers viable approaches for investigating the reconcep-

tualized subject matter of the social/human sciences in general, and communication studies in particular. More generally stated: contemporary philosophy has much to offer to communication studies' own strategies for strengthening its claims to intellectual importance and institutional legitimacy. Since these are persistent concerns in the discipline, communication researchers would seem to have good reasons for attending to philosophers who are already aligned with their research agendas, by virtue of having recognized and theorized communication as basic in and for understanding human being. Before considering those reasons and focusing on phenomenology's role in that alignment, there is a second aspect of communication studies that needs mentioning, since it supplies further motives for welcoming philosophical reflection and reconceptualization.

The early years of academic study of communication were strongly marked by a meliorative goal. That is, while philosophy, psychology, and sociology struggled with a demand that their research be "value-free" and separated from applications that might be made of their investigations, communication research has always been marked by a strong interest in improving performance. The entire discipline, therefore, has been and still is value-based and practice-oriented, rather than fact-based and theory-oriented: it is literally supported by institutional and cultural acceptance of the value of "good communication skills" and the belief that those skills can be improved through instructed practice. Initially, this meant a focus on the "public speaking" that was of particular importance to those in or aspiring to political office. That goal still thrives in the discipline today, although it has expanded into explicit attention to improving communication in various group and organizational settings. As a result, communication "science" has always been, and to a large extent still is, driven by communication "technology," while the opposite hierarchy has been assumed – indeed, insisted upon – in most fields.

During these past few decades this previously unproblematic basis of the field has come under increasing attack from within the discipline. A variety of critical approaches have challenged the elitism and homogenization of style that are especially present in teaching elocution; have uncovered class, ethnic, and gender stereotypes implicit in most strategies for "improving" communication; have identified vast manipulative potential inherent in contemporary mass communication techniques; and have deplored the field's predominant "practical" rather than "theoretical" interest as a valorizing of "technology" rather than "science." This last criticism relates to the field's institutional legitimacy problems. Cognate disciplines such as linguistics and sociology typically adhere to the opposite hierarchy; in so doing, they follow a strongly embedded cultural assumption that can be traced to Plato's preference for *theoria* over *praxis* and *techne*. Paradoxically,

cally, that prevalent interest (if freed from a lingering adherence to representational claims dictated by the physical-science model) can be understood as a positive feature of the discipline. As Don Ihde (1991: 56) notes, following Heidegger: “science as a way of seeing is located within and dependent upon the priority of technology as a material, existential, and cultural way of seeing.” Communication studies’ present inability to use the argument for the “priority of technology” that underlies that remark, in justifying its goals within the academic community, is an all too evident result of the relative inattention to philosophical reflection already mentioned.

The essays collected here suggest that philosophical analyses of the assumptions, procedures, and goals of inquiry can respond to these criticisms in ways congenial and beneficial to the field. These communication scholars discern alternative possibilities of analysis that require them to question and revise basic ideas. In other words, they start by going backward: they reject an exclusive concern with data in order to reflexively attend to the conceptual context that exercises directorial if not dictatorial control over the many and subtle choices a researcher must make as to what shall be studied, how, and for what purpose. They recognize that such attention to the philosophical dimension of their work is an ongoing task. It cannot be done once as a preliminary to empirical investigation, but must be maintained as a sort of second track within research that gives persistent attention to the philosophical issues implicit in any research design.

There seem to me two interconnected reasons for the relative scarcity of this sort of attention to philosophy in communication research. First, much of what contemporary philosophy has been saying about science amounts to a demand for drastic alteration in how we understand the nature and practice of inquiry. There is a persistent theme that runs from Husserl’s identification of a crisis in science brought about by science’s lack of “grounding” in the “lifeworld” (actual sociocultural interaction), to Kuhn’s identification of “paradigms” – disciplinary environments formed by values inculcated along with the practices of any tradition, scholarly or mundane, which frame and support a “matrix” within which inquiry occurs. That theme tells us that we need to do nothing less than revise our convictions about what we are, how we place ourselves in relation to the environment we seek to know, and what sort of knowledge we can expect. In other words, both the “who” and the “how” of research must be altered, quite explicitly and thoroughly; and the implications of those changes extend quite pervasively into the “why” of research.

Secondly, it is a rather well-established tenet of everyday and scholarly life that we abide with established ways of doing things (paradigms) as long as possible. Research practices and principles persevere until a discipline’s

accepted presumptions and procedures run thin; that is, until investigators tire of “doing the same old thing,” or until we find that “the same old thing” does not work with new issues, problems, or questions thrust upon us by a constantly changing sociocultural (including multi-disciplinary) environment. Furthermore, even when researchers do reach a stage of having researched-out (so to speak) the prospects of their paradigms, alternatives must be ready-to-hand; they must present themselves as feasible options, if they are to be adapted or adopted. Much philosophical work, however, does not make itself ready to hands, or minds, other than those of (some) other philosophers.

Perhaps this inaccessibility is a legacy of the ancient sundering of philosophy from rhetoric, technology, and science, together with philosophy’s traditional self-perception as superior to those other modes of inquiry. Perhaps also, it is an inheritance of philosophy’s institutionalization within “the humanities” and communication studies’ predominant correlative placement within “the social/human sciences,” for that compartmentalizing elevates many assumptions as to what shall be studied and said, and how, and to what end, into norms. And perhaps, ultimately, this inaccessibility is a side effect of gnostic tendencies within all social groups – and so, within all disciplines – together with the genuine discomforts of translating localized terminology (the jargon that develops within any group) into more generally accessible discourse.

Alternative conceptions of research have begun to appear in communication studies, despite these powerful reasons for neglecting or avoiding what philosophers have to say about the nature of inquiry. This has occurred, I believe, because some researchers – and especially, ethnographers – set out to conduct investigations in which the traditional models simply cannot be applied in any satisfactory way. Anthropologists often find themselves investigating situations in which the how, why, and even, the what of things is largely unintelligible; not comprehensible in terms of familiar ways of being human. Limiting inquiry to physical characteristics and empirically or logically demonstrable connections, they discover, tells only a small part of the story that seems to be there for the telling, but not, for telling within a physical-science paradigm. Similarly although in a sense in an opposite way, sociologists investigating situations in which their own social natures are implicated, cannot tell those stories without also telling and perhaps challenging some part of their own stories, and thus violating the physical-science paradigm model of inquiry.

The response to this sort of difficulty is not so much a “scientific revolution” (as Kuhn, 1970, theorized) but a stretching and blurring of boundaries. The subject-object dichotomy may be transgressed when the purported border eludes precise location and the supposed opposites borrow

from each other. Connections other than physical causality may be recognized once researchers notice that they are not themselves causally moved into inquiry, and proceed to trace out the implications of their own activities. The result can be gradual, and to some extent surreptitious, changes in method that eventuate in a move beyond the strictures of explanation, and into description. Clifford Geertz's (1973: 14) conclusion about the entities central to his own discipline begins to seem appropriate to the entirety of the human/social sciences: "culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described."

This stretching of the boundaries can also provoke changes in the goal of inquiry: a focus on prediction and control can expand into concern with understanding how the situation constitutes itself as it is, and could have constituted itself otherwise. This can include a refocusing by the researcher on understanding how and why he or she has come to be as the agent of inquiry. Tracing out the implications of this activity incites understanding of how humans are constituted in their intrinsically social and communicative activities. If research expands in this way – and there is no necessity that it do so – communicative interactivity appears repeatedly. It stakes out a claim at the core of constitutive processes implicated by entities which are the starting points for research modeled on the physical sciences. The task of communication research expands and increases in importance: we are no longer simply concerned with what people say about things, but also, with what is said in order that those people and those things are present for saying and being said about.

In describing this complex a context, and doing so "thickly" (in Geertz's sense), which is to say, so as to discern the intelligibility of people and things as they mutually co-constitute their meaningfulness in lived experience, the empirical and logical demonstrations of lawfulness that are vital to a predictive science are irrelevant. Likewise, causal relationships, the mechanism crucial to prediction, are (so to speak) demoted to the status of one pattern among many sorts of connection that can be inferred or observed. (Others are motives, reasons, contiguity, succession, functioning as a condition of possibility, whole-part affinity, and grounded-grounding relations.) What phenomenology provides for researchers who investigate this complexity is a rationale for proceeding in one order rather than another, namely, from detailed and systematic description of particular actual experience to general claims as to how that communicative interaction appears to be meaningful to its participants and also, could be otherwise meaningful. From that plateau of generality, the researcher can inquire into the extent to which that meaningfulness is present in more or less

variant form in other instances of communicative activity. The thrust of inquiry here would be positing general, cross-cultural, and perhaps universal patterns of communication. Or, attention could reflexively turn to the specifics of the situation: to analyzing the who, what, how, and why components as they function as interactive parts of the whole situation.

Phenomenology also provides a rationale for maintaining focus on communicative interaction itself, rather than on prior conditions or consequent products such as linguistic rules, affective and cognitive dispositions, or cultural expectations. This is not to say that all of these conditions and products are not used in communicative interactivity. It is to say that adopting a phenomenological orientation commits researchers to staying with the communicative context itself and maintaining a descriptive focus on how those conditions and products function in the genesis of meaningfulness in and for that context. "In the beginning is the deed," as Husserl (1970: 156) reminds us, and insofar as communication research – rather than economic, political, social, or psychological research – is the task of the communication researcher, the focus must remain on the experienced efficacy of those entities, in the communicative deed.

To summarize, then: a phenomenologically oriented researcher works with four major concerns in investigating communicative activity. The basic focus is on *constitution*, in contrast to construction or creation. How social reality forms in human interaction with the environment, and in particular, in communicative interaction with other communicating beings situated within an environment, is the central concern. This conceptualization of social reality as constituted includes attention to the formation of persons and things, rather than common-sensically accepting the nature and being of either as simply given, prior to communicative constitution. It asks descriptive, rather than metaphysical, questions: the phenomenological question is always, how are entities present as meaningful for participants, rather than, what are entities in themselves, outside of communicative interactivity.

Reflexivity is inherent in mundane as well as research life, and reflexive questioning of what is present to description directs the phenomenologist toward a multiplicity of possible questions, topics, and emphases within any specific inquiry and in research in general. Reflexivity reinforces our awareness of the breadth of variations that are possible, given the diversity of researchers' interests, the multitude of assumptions intrinsic to diverse methodologies, and the intrinsic ambiguity of responses to any question that may be posed in mundane or research experience. Reflexivity in alliance with rejection of metaphysical claims strengthens the importance of *interpretation* in phenomenological description. The researcher asks how the phenomena are and how they could present themselves otherwise – but

not, what they are and must be. "Findings," thus, must be arguably plausible interpretations, given the particular context and tradition within which the research occurs.

Lastly, phenomenological research seeks to understand the *meaningfulness* of acts, events, and situations, rather than theorize about meanings, ideas, or arguments in abstractive isolation from their occurrence. Meaningfulness is culturally specified, morally attuned, socially negotiated, and locally applied. Thus the phenomenologist engaged in communication research is committed to providing detailed description that demonstrates the orderliness he or she discovers in lived experience; to uncovering the structure within that experience; to showing the pattern of initiating activity and responding to an environment that characterizes a self; and to understanding the entirety of those "findings" from the viewpoint of the experiencer, rather than a posited neutral observer. The essays in this issue demonstrate, in their variety but also in their allegiance to these themes and commitments, the vitality of phenomenology in communication research.

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